



Press Release

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CDC Survey Finds that 1 in 5 U.S. High School Students Have Abused Prescription Drugs

One in 5 U.S. high school students say they have ever taken a prescription drug without a doctor's prescription, according to the [2009 National Youth Risk Behavior Survey \(YRBS\)](#) released today by the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#). This is the first year the survey assessed prescription drug abuse among high school students. The YRBS has been conducted every other year since 1991.

The survey asked if they'd ever taken a prescription drug such as OxyContin, Percocet, Vicodin, Adderall, Ritalin, or Xanax, without a doctor's prescription. Prescription drug abuse was most common among white students (23 percent), followed by Hispanic students (17 percent) and then black students (12 percent). Prescription drug abuse was most common among 12th grade students (26 percent) and lowest among 9th grade students (15 percent). There was no difference in prescription drug abuse by gender (20 percent for both male and female students).

"We are concerned to learn that so many high school students are taking prescription drugs that were not prescribed to them," said [Howell Wechsler, EdD, MPH](#), director of [CDC's Division of Adolescent and School Health](#). "Some people may falsely believe that prescription drugs are safer than illegal drugs, yet their misuse can cause serious adverse health effects, including addiction and death."

The YRBS also asks several questions related to alcohol and drug use. The 2009 survey found that about 72 percent of high school students ever used alcohol, about 37 percent ever used marijuana, 6.4 percent ever used cocaine, 4.1 percent ever used methamphetamine, and 6.7 percent ever used ecstasy. These percentages are similar to those found in the 2007 survey.

Further analysis of National YRBS data showed encouraging trends in nutrition-related behaviors in recent years:

- A decrease in the percentage of students who drank soda at least once per day (34 percent in 2007; 29 percent in 2009)
- An increase in the percentage of students who ate fruit or drank 100 percent fruit juice two or more times per day (30 percent in 2005; 34 percent in 2009)
- Decreases in the percentages of students who engaged in the following unhealthy behaviors to lose or keep from gaining weight: not eating for 24 or more hours (13 percent in 2001; 11 percent in 2009); taking diet pills, powders, or liquids (9 percent in 2001; 5 percent in 2009); and vomiting or taking laxatives (6 percent in 2003; 4 percent in 2009)

The 2009 National YRBS results also show that many high school students engage in other risk behaviors, which are harmful to their overall health and increase their risk of disease and injury. For example, during the seven days



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before the survey, 78 percent of high school students had not eaten fruits and vegetables five or more times per day, and 82 percent were not physically active for at least 60 minutes daily. Also, during the 30 days before the survey, 19 percent of high school students smoked cigarettes, 28 percent rode in a car or other vehicle driven by someone who had been drinking alcohol, and 39 percent of currently sexually active students reported that they did not use a condom the last time they had sexual intercourse. This information is similar to the 2007 YRBS findings.

About YRBS

National, state, and local YRBS studies are conducted every two years among high school students throughout the United States. These surveys monitor health risk behaviors including unintentional injuries and violence; tobacco, alcohol, and other drug use; sexual behaviors that contribute to unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV infection; unhealthy dietary behaviors; and physical inactivity. These surveys also monitor the prevalence of obesity and asthma.

More than 16,000 U.S. high school students participated in the 2009 National YRBS. Data are presented only for black, Hispanic, and white students because the sample size of students from other racial/ethnic populations was too small for meaningful analysis. Parental permission was obtained for students to participate in the survey. Student participation was voluntary, and responses were anonymous. States and cities could modify the questionnaire to meet their needs. The 2009 report includes national data and data from surveys conducted in 42 states and 20 large urban school districts.

The National YRBS is one of three HHS-sponsored surveys that provide data on substance abuse among youth. The others are the [National Survey on Drug Use and Health \(NSDUH\)](#), sponsored by the [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#) and a primary source of statistics on substance use among Americans age 12 and over (www.oas.samhsa.gov/nhsda.htm), and the [Monitoring the Future \(MTF\) Study](#) funded by the [National Institute on Drug Abuse](#) and conducted by the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research (<http://monitoringthefuture.org>). MTF tracks substance use and related attitudes among students in the 8th, 10th and 12th grades.

The 2009 Youth Risk Behavior Survey data are available at www.cdc.gov/yrbs.

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